

ALA CONFERENCE: NEW ORLEANS

by Deloice Holliday



he first thing I noticed about New Orleans was the length of time it took to get there and the variety of things that caused delays. Yes, you guessed it; my number came up as one of those randomly selected airline passengers who gets called over to the side to be checked by a “female security person.” I tried unsuccessfully to engage the female security person in a conversation about how and why I was selected for the wand and pat down, but she just kept saying, “Ma’am, just be quiet, this won’t take long.” I tried to be quiet but wanted to know, how does this random thing work? She continued to “shush” me. Finally after my bag and I were “wanded,” I was released to continue my flight, or so I thought.

The first delay occurred at the Indianapolis International Airport where weather delayed my flight to Houston. Not to worry, though, I was flying into Houston, Texas, for a two hour layover and then I would be on my way to New Orleans. The two hour delay in Houston at the George Bush International Airport turned out to be many hours of delay. In fact, it was so many hours I stopped counting. The good thing about getting stranded at some airports is the very expensive airport food and beverages. At least there was a variety, ranging from Chinese to Mexican, to American to Italian. You name it, whatever your taste dictated could be found at the Houston airport. I don’t know about the rest of you, but it is difficult for me to stay up past a certain hour and when that hour was approaching I was still in Houston. I began to get a bit annoyed and angry but not so much that I would write a letter to the airlines. Besides, I knew the weather was inclement in many parts of the country that day. The food was good, the seats were comfortable, and the best part was there was a television story about a family owned business from my hometown. At first I thought it was airport fatigue but then I watched a bit more and it was real. I could not believe it, a story about the Roller Dome North. If you happen to have grown up in Fort Wayne, Indiana, like me, you probably spent a good deal of time at either the Roller Dome North or the Roller Dome South roller rink. This story kept me interested long enough to forget how angry and

fatigued I felt.

After a barrage of delays we left Houston headed for New Orleans. Finally, I arrived at Louis Armstrong Airport at around three o’clock in the morning. I should have arrived hours before, but that was okay. I was on the ground. But wait, where was my airport ground transportation? It was not to be found so I took a taxi. My driver did not speak English and I didn’t speak his language either so I was unsure whether he was taking me to the right hotel, but I put my trust in this stranger and hopped into the cab. I settled down and looked for the safety belt. I kept asking the driver about the seat belt situation, but he ignored my question and informed me again that he knew where my hotel was. It was pitch black dark outside, and I could not see a thing, and he was driving faster than I liked. There I was with no seatbelt. So what’s a savvy, make-do librarian going to do? I tied the seat belt ends together and hoped that I would arrive at my hotel in one piece. Then I looked over to my left and saw that the seat belt on the other side of the cab was tied together too. I concluded the seat beats in this taxi must be the kind you tie instead of click.

I arrived at my hotel about 3:30-ish in the morning thoroughly fatigued but happy to be there. The taxi driver opened the door for me, pulled my luggage from the backseat, and asked for an astronomical amount of money. The cab driver had nearly scared me to death with his driving. And to top it off, upon driving away he said, “You be safe now.” Once in front of the hotel, I saw members of the National Guard who were staying at my hotel so I did feel safe, even though reports prior to the conference would have us believe that danger was around every corner.

At the first day of the conference, I was wandering around trying to find the convention center, but I couldn’t quite get my bearings. Yes, I had been to New Orleans many times before and used to have family and friends who lived there, but most had fled to Mississippi and Tennessee after Hurricane Katrina. I finally saw a woman who had the librarian look, you know, the savvy, make-do kind of look. I told her that I was searching for the convention center, and she said that

she was, too. We chatted about the airport delays that seemingly many folks were experiencing and the high cost of things, but again we agreed that we were doing something for the city of New Orleans by attending the conference. Finally arriving at the Morial Convention Center, my new walking buddy and I met up with librarians who thought we looked as if we knew how to find the registration desk. We registered, picked up our conference bags, and then said our good-byes and, as a final word, said to one another, "I hope you have a good conference."

Later that afternoon I walked around the Morial Convention Center thinking about all the things that had been reported to have occurred there during and following Hurricane Katrina, but now everything looked okay to me. Workmen were repairing or remodeling some areas of the convention center, but for the most part I believe it was restored and functional. As I wandered, I finally found the "\$ for diversity" booth that I had agreed to staff on the following day. At the booth I met with colleagues already at work selling the wristbands for the diversity fundraiser. The "\$ for diversity" campaign is an ongoing ALA Committee on Diversity Initiative. Monies raised go toward the support of diversity initiatives such as the development of a conference travel grant for paraprofessionals to attend ALA Annual Conference and the creation of a scholarship for doctoral level LIS studies.

I had several committee obligations including serving on the Committee on Literacy, the Committee on Diversity, and the Committee on Literacy and Outreach Services. One of the highlights for me was the "Many Voices, One Nation: New Orleans" program. This program featured speakers still living in New Orleans and others who were displaced by the storms who gave their personal testimonies, feelings, and thoughts on how it felt to be a New Orleanian who had survived the storm. It was a very moving night of music, poetry readings, songs, and reminiscing about how New Orleans used to be but mostly about surviving Hurricane Katrina and the federal government's lack of action.

There were many offsite programs, tours, and plenty of service opportunities, too. A tour of note sponsored by ALA's Committee on Literacy was held at the Lindy Boggs National Center for Community Literacy at the Monroe Library of Loyola University. The Boggs Center staff and representatives from the Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans shared organizational and personal literacy experiences pre- and post-Katrina. Even though I have friends and relatives who formerly lived in New Orleans, I would not allow myself to venture far from the official conference site, for me it was just too sad to see the city in shambles.

My final day at the conference was a series of continuous meetings and programs going from one meeting or program to another. I spent the evening attending the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) Alumni Reunion followed by a late evening meeting of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA). Getting back to my hotel around 11-ish, I was a bit anxious about my early morning departure. I packed everything that night and laid out my traveling clothes. Knowing that I would not be able to get a shuttle at 5 a.m., I made arrangements for a taxi. I checked out of the hotel, got into the taxicab (this one did not have seatbelts either), and as we drove away in the early morning darkness, I looked back for one last glance at New Orleans, a changed and somewhat quieter city, but still it was New Orleans.

There were no delays on my return trip, although I did have a layover in Atlanta. It had been a fulfilling and interesting but busy conference, and I was glad to be going home. The plane arrived back in Indianapolis on time. As I navigated my way back to Bloomington, I thought about my trip to New Orleans. Even with the prolonged trip to get there and cabs without seat belts, New Orleans is still a city I wouldn't have wanted to miss.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deloise (Dee) Holliday has served as the Multicultural Outreach Librarian at Indiana University's Herman B Wells Library in the Information Common Undergraduate Library Services (ICUGLS) Department since 2001. Her duties include developing outreach, educational and collection-specific programs, and activities to promote library services to students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds at Indiana University Bloomington. She is also the collection manager and provides advanced instruction and reference to the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences.

